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85- 3459

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Date: September 10, 1985 **Number:** 175526CA **Due By:** --

Subject: "U.S.-Soviet Relations in the Late 20th Century" -- Speech delivered at the Channel City Club and Women's Forum luncheon, Santa Barbara, California, August 19, 1985

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RETURN TO:

☑ Alfred H. Kingon
Cabinet Secretary
456-2823
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☐ Don Clarey
☐ Ed Stucky
☐ Rick Davis

Associate Director
Office of Cabinet Affairs
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Robert C. McFarlane

U.S.-Soviet Relations in the Late 20th Century

United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.

Following is an address by Robert C. McFarlane, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, at the Channel City Club and Women's Forum luncheon, Santa Barbara, California, August 19, 1985.

Before long President Reagan will meet in Geneva with the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mr. Gorbachev. The meeting comes at a historic moment if measured by the enormity of change that has taken place in the West and the apparent potential for change in the East. In the past 4 years here in the United States, and more broadly in the West, we have experienced a political, economic, and social renewal of historic proportion. Four years ago we seemed paralyzed by the moral and institutional aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate; our economic problems seemed beyond our comprehension with solutions nowhere in sight; the military balance had shifted dramatically against us, and its effects were reflected in growing Soviet influence from Angola to Ethiopia to Indochina, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua. Our alliances were severely shaken and leaders from London to Paris to Moscow were asking whether the United States had lost its way and whether we could regain our ability to play a positive role of leadership in international affairs.

Today, the picture is dramatically different. President Reagan has set our economy solidly on the road to recovery; our foundation of strength is being restored; Soviet expansion has been checked and even rolled back on a tiny island in the Caribbean. In sum, America has regained its moorings, it is leading, and peace is more secure.

On the Soviet side of the ledger, the picture is less clear, but surely the possibility for a more promising future exists. A new Soviet leader is in place—a man unencumbered by the vicissitudes of primary elections and campaigns and, therefore, a man who may endure through the turn of the century.

Here in the United States—a nation of optimists led by the greatest optimist in our history—we hope for the best. We are sobered by the knowledge that seldom has our optimism been vindicated. And yet it endures. But as we set out on what we hope will be a more promising period, we should proceed forthrightly, honestly stating both our purposes and our misgivings, hiding neither our hopes nor our fears.

This is a time of considerable flux and introspection in the Kremlin. They deserve to know from whence we are coming if they are to reach coherent decisions. Perhaps by stating some of our frustrations we can shape their thinking. That is my purpose today.

Soviet-American Rivalry

It's often said that the rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union is close to immutable and that our job is not to end it but merely to keep it under control. Some say that since 1945 there's been only one way to end it and that it's too terrible to contemplate. But for many others the inevitability of competition is not caused simply by the gruesome facts of the nuclear age. It has much deeper, older, and—as some see it—even more ineradicable causes. For some, de Tocqueville's famous predictions of 150 years ago have taken on a folkloric, if not intellectual legitimacy.

Anyone who works on the concrete issues dividing these countries knows that practical policy decisions are never made on the assumption that a fundamental change in Soviet-American relations is anywhere in sight. To the contrary, we have to take competition as a given and do the best that we can. But this should not become an excuse for not thinking about what is at the heart of our disagreements. I have studied, reflected, and worked on international affairs for many years, and no one has ever convinced me that there is some law of nature requiring two populous and powerful nations halfway around the world from each other to be locked in permanent hostility. If they are hostile, it's probably for reasons other than their "two-ness," their "populous-ness," their "powerful-ness," or their distance from each other.

I think the real sources of conflict are things that can—and do—change. If there is a military rivalry between two great countries, it's caused less by the arms themselves than by the way the two sides think about military security. If there is a geopolitical rivalry, it's not caused by the facts of geography but by the way the two sides define their political security and their other interests. If there is a clash of ideas—well, not even ideologies are permanent. Some political ideologies are a source of near boundless energy and creativity, but others are true prisons, confining not only those who believe in them but many who don't. Nothing can hinder human energy and creativity like a bad idea. But, as I have said, it is our good fortune that ideas are not immortal. They are subject to what is sometimes called "reality therapy"—the test of time and experience. Sometimes, with any luck, they can be cast off. Mental prison walls do come down. As rare as it seems in this century of institutionalized fanaticisms, people do change their minds.

We know from the statements of Soviet leaders that these days many existing policies are getting especially close scrutiny. Certainly the test of time and experience has been a very harsh one. General Secretary Gorbachev himself recently called for "a fresh look at all the shortcomings, negative phenomena, all sorts of blunders." He made

clear that reevaluation has been long deferred. In the future, in his words:

> . . . more order will be required, more scientific inquiry, more major, important decisions, and so forth. Overall it will require immense mobilization of creative forces, and the ability to restructure and conduct matters in the country in a new way, not only in the economy but also in the social sphere, in that of culture, ideology, in all spheres.

These seem like hopeful words, but perhaps you will agree that those of us in the West, on the outside, have a hard time knowing how to interpret them. We cannot know whether a process of comprehensive change is underway or not. In the past, the appearance of change has been no more than a mask behind which systemic rigidities endure. Each new leader—however strongly he might favor change—has found that having risen by following the rules of the system, he becomes captive to it. If such a process is beginning, it will be difficult to discern, we may or may not be able to make a contribution to it, and we cannot predict its outcome. But inasmuch as it does greatly affect us, it is certainly appropriate for us to suggest the kinds of questions that we will be asking about it—the questions whose answers will make a large difference in our own policy. I assume that Soviet officials would also like to know our thinking as to what kinds of change would do the most to make Soviet-American relations more stable. We sometimes hear the Soviet complaint that they don't know what we're after, so let us be clear.

Military Issues

Let me begin with military issues. I have said that the wheels of military rivalry are not set in motion by arms themselves but by the thinking that governs the arms, by the political doctrines, decisions, and interests that are reflected in the organization, shape, and size of a military machine. In recent years many Soviet decisions have been quite troubling to us, suggesting an outlook on security issues that is very different from our own. By this I don't mean simply that Soviet military spending is so high—although it is. But that isn't what concerns me here. I want to call your attention to something different—to decisions that resume or initiate competition in an area where there hadn't been any at all.

Take the case of chemical weapons. In this century, these weapons have created a revulsion and horror in Western publics second only to nuclear weapons. It was a horror, moreover, that our governments were able to act on quite successfully. The Geneva Protocol of 1925 was for many years one of the most widely supported *and observed* arms control agreements on record. As a result, our own capabilities, stocks, and training experienced a long decline. We haven't produced chemical weapons in 15 years. Unfortunately, this was not paralleled on the Soviet side, whose major effort became impossible to ignore. For this reason we have now proposed to modernize our own chemical weapons program. We'd rather not do this, and Congress also would rather not, and we've tried to head it off. In April 1984 President Reagan sent Vice President Bush to Geneva with proposals to negotiate a complete ban on chemical weapons, but since then the talks have not made progress.

This record suggests a specific question: what has the Soviet side gained from reviving this competition? Particularly now, as chemical weapons are being made (cheaply) and used (lethally) by small countries, isn't it imperative that we find effective, verifiable controls?

I wish this were an isolated case. But we see the same pattern in the issue that dominated Soviet-American arms control talks, as well as public controversy, during the President's first term—medium-range nuclear missiles. Again, a bit of history may be useful. You may know that over many years the United States scaled back its medium-range missile capabilities in Europe; the Soviets did not. During the 1950s and 1960s many plans were developed within the Western alliance to counter the Soviet edge, but they were abandoned one after another for a series of different reasons. A sense of urgency about the problem began to subside with the emergence of detente in the late 1960s. And the specific military worry created by a large Soviet missile advantage was softened over time: the Soviet Union seemed to be letting its large medium-range missiles grow old. But then an odd thing happened. The Soviets began instead to *add* to their force, introducing the SS-20, one of the most formidable weapons ever fielded by the East. To make a long story short, the result was a NATO decision that, after all, these new Soviet deployments had to be answered. In 1983, after 2 fruitless years of trying to negotiate a solution to the INF problem—that stands for intermediate-range nuclear forces—the West began to put its own missiles in place.

INF isn't in the headlines much these days, and there may be an analytical advantage in this. We now have a little distance on this sequence of events and a responsibility to judge them critically. What happened? An East-West dispute took shape on an issue that some thought had gone away. Two questions come to mind that I still find hard to answer: what can the Soviet Union imagine that it got out of reigniting this competition? What did it get out of several years of one-sided negotiating positions, premised on an expectation of Western disunity?

Finally, let me take up the military question that is in the headlines—the relation between offensive and defensive strategic systems. As you may know, in 1972 the United States and Soviet Union agreed that neither side should build a defense against ballistic missiles. The Soviet Union has since built and maintained the defensive system around its capital allowed by the agreement; the United States has not. Both sides have pursued research, as the treaty permits; the Soviet research effort has been extremely large.

Now, while keeping strictly within the limits of the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty, President Reagan has proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative to reinvestigate the feasibility of defenses. Two reasons above all others produced this decision:

First, the past decade's enormous Soviet offensive buildup, which has put the survivability of our forces in question, and

Second, the President's desire to see whether the fragility of the nuclear balance can be reduced by moving us away from a morally unsatisfactory doctrine on nuclear retaliation.

As the President has said many times, this is one of the most hopeful possibilities of our time. We believe it could contribute to both sides' security, especially if we make progress in the Geneva arms talks. We have hoped in these talks to explore each side's thinking on how to strengthen strategic stability. But what has been the Soviet response? Soviet public statements, with which many of you will be familiar, simply propose something we believe is non-negotiable and nonverifiable—a ban on research even as they pursue the largest research program on earth. And in a masterpiece of *chutzpah,* they insist repeatedly that ours is a program designed to acquire a first-strike capability.

In short, we're having a lot of trouble establishing a real dialogue. And bearing in mind the other examples I've cited, we have to face some disturbing questions. Will the Soviet Union start to approach this matter as a potentially cooperative one or approach everything on a zero-sum basis? The other instances—chemical and INF—suggest that these all-or-nothing tactics don't serve the Soviet Union well.

Obviously, a great deal hangs on the answers to these questions. The President has committed himself to meet the Soviet Union halfway in developing responsible solutions to outstanding problems. I can restate that commit-

ment today. But without some change in the Soviet approach to security issues—in fact, in the thinking that underlies it—I fear that even incremental improvements will be extremely hard to reach. And they will be much less likely to gather momentum, to build on each other.

International Political Issues

The issues of Soviet-American rivalry, of course, go beyond military matters. There is the critical question of how each side defines its interests in the world. Many in the West are looking for signs of change in the Soviet Union's thinking on international political issues. Some students of the problem argue that it is now what they call a "mature" power; that it is not guided by Lenin's old dictum "the worse, the better"; that it is not so deeply driven by an ideological animus against the West; and that it need not leap at every opportunity to hamstring American policy for its own sake.

These would obviously be important changes. How should we decide whether they are true? Obviously, by practical measures. As these matters come to be discussed in Moscow, the Soviet leadership should know that we have practical measures like Afghanistan, Cuba, and Libya in mind.

Take Afghanistan. Today, 120,000 Soviet soldiers there are waging the most brutal war now underway on the face of the earth. For what? It's not so easy to say. Some in the West believe that the Soviet Union instigated the 1978 communist coup that preceded the 1979 invasion. As you may know, Soviet officials and commentators always dissociate themselves from this and explain that they had nothing to do with it. We can't know, but we can ask questions about Soviet policy to clarify its objectives. If the Soviets truly propose to dissociate themselves from it, to indicate that they have no interest in fomenting such events, then why are 120,000 troops in Afghanistan protecting the small number of people who made that coup from the opposition of the Afghan people? Soviet officials say that they need a friendly Afghanistan on their border. We can perhaps understand this desire, but how is friendship to be built? Our proposition to the Soviet leadership is that their present policy is only increasing the Afghan people's hatred. Does the Soviet side have a nonmilitary strategy for dealing with that problem? If so, they will find us ready to help put it in place.

Or take Libya. There are few if any governments today whose policy as a whole could be better described as "the worse, the better." Col. Qadhafi is an heir to that tradition of seeking to provoke or benefit from trouble and instability. That being the case, Americans have to ask some serious questions about Soviet support for him. A small example will suffice: with all the problems of terrorism in that part of the world, what good is served by providing Soviet submarines to Qadhafi? Or, given the war in the Persian Gulf, which seems to drag on endlessly, what good is served by giving missiles to Col. Qadhafi, which then find their way to Iran and finally land in downtown Baghdad, the capital of a country that has a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union? Is this what friendship treaties mean? Americans are entitled to ask with utmost seriousness: if Soviet policy is not "the worse, the better," then shouldn't the Soviet Union's relationship with Col. Qadhafi be very different?

Finally, take Cuba. The price tag of Soviet support for Cuba is calculated by our experts at something like $5 billion a year. As a benchmark of sorts, that's about as much as we provide to Egypt and Israel combined—and together their population is five times that of Cuba. This must be, in other words, a massively important commitment of Soviet policy. But what is it a commitment to? To us, frankly, it seems that the principal benefit is in the offensive purposes to which Cuba—Cuban troops, Cuban advisers, Cuban bases—can be put.

The record of Cuban policy in the past 10 years is an extraordinary one, and it is all the more extradordinary because it did not have to be this way. For the first 10 years or so after the missile crisis of 1962, Cuba was not a major irritant in Soviet-American relations. Now it is. Its military personnel are in the thick of wars on two continents and, despite international pressures from many directions, show no signs of returning home. The pattern is something like what I sketched in talking about chemical weapons or missiles in Europe. The Soviet Union has reignited a source of conflict. Has it benefited by doing so? We hope this question is being asked in Moscow.

There should be no doubt about the ability of the United States to deal with these difficulties when they are placed in our way. That's not the issue. Naturally, we have to pay more attention to the security of Pakistan than we did some years ago, but we can do it. Similarly, we now have to pay more attention to the security of El Salvador than we used to, but we can manage that too. And we don't look the other way at the problems that Libya creates for neighboring countries, among them some good friends of the United States.

The question that remains, however, concerns the broader impact of all this on Soviet-American relations and whether this is the impact that the Soviet side wants. It certainly sends us loud messages that can't be ignored about the motivations of Soviet policy. It makes improvements in other areas more difficult. It all but guarantees that any small steps forward that we may be able to take will be isolated, hard to preserve, and perhaps devalued in advance by both sides.

None of this, I might add, is much changed by hearing from the Soviet side of their responsibility to help other "socialist" countries. For us, of course, that comes down to helping other governments oppress their people. We believe that Soviet-style socialism has brought hardship to and restricted the potential of many great nations. That is our deeply held view. No doubt the Soviet leadership disagrees, but let's not leave the matter there. I hope they will at least ponder a different question: that is, whether such Soviet involvements can be justified even in your own terms. Here in the West, for example, we remember General Secretary Andropov's comments about the difference between building socialism and merely proclaiming it. We hope that such skepticism can be a source of doubt about whether the Soviet policies I've been describing have really served your interests.

Human Rights and Democracy

So far, I have dealt with the political-military issues that trouble our relations. They almost always dominate the agenda of problems between us. They are what our negotiators focus on. There are many more issues I could touch on—from Poland to nuclear proliferation. But, as important as all these are, they are not the area in which the most momentous changes could take place. Frankly, the most durable and far-reaching kind of improvement in Soviet-American relations—and probably in the Soviet Union's relations with almost every country of the world—would be created by events inside the Soviet Union.

When Americans raise the issue of human rights with Soviet officials, they know what to expect. It is the Soviet position that we are treading on "internal matters." The Soviet side by now is also quite accustomed to what we usually say in return—that many of these matters involve commitments made in the Helsinki Final Act. We're talking about obligations that the Soviet Union freely assumed.

This is an important point: treaties signed have to be taken seriously. But it's not the main reason Americans take an interest in human rights and democracy. And the reason isn't just that we believe in morality in politics or that our hearts go out to Soviet Jews who wish

to emigrate and can't. No, it's that real progress in that direction would have a fundamental effect on the international system, on the way we do business with each other.

When President Reagan was in China in April 1984, he gave a speech that must surely rank as one of the most candid ever made by a leader visiting a country with a different political system. He put his message simply: "Trust the people." For us, the meaning of a phrase like that is obvious, but many of the ideologies of the 20th century rest on suspicion of the people, on the conviction that they cannot handle their own affairs. Since that's the case, let me say briefly what trusting the people means in practical terms. Let's leave aside sentiment and turn to some specifics. What can the people do if they are trusted?

First, only the people can revolutionize agricultural productivity. All other approaches are hopelessly irrelevant. Over 20 years ago, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union accused the Chinese party of believing that "if a people walks in rope sandals and eats watery soup out of a common bowl—that is communism." No such sarcastic accusation could be made today. In the past 7 years, agricultural productivity in China has actually doubled. And Prime Minister Gandhi, during his recent visit here, spoke to us of the gains made in Indian agriculture through increased incentives. Today, India is a net exporter of grain. How? The people have done it.

Second, only the people can lead the scientific-technological revolution. They are leading it in those countries enjoying the most rapid economic growth today. No Ministry of Central Planning can lead it. In the United States the watchword of change in the structure of our economy is decentralization—the spectacular growth of new companies offering new products in a field like information technology. In the speech in China that I just quoted, President Reagan said, "Make no mistake: those who ignore this vital truth will condemn their countries to fall farther and farther behind . . . ."

Finally, only the people can invigorate national culture. I mean culture in both the low- and the high-brow sense. I mean, as it happens, both entertainment and enlightenment. I mean arts and letters, music and films. Only the people can build national self-esteem and self-expression out of malaise. No Ministry of Culture can do it.

Now every people will perform these tasks in its own way. Cultures come out differently. For all the changes underway, China remains distinctly Chinese and recognizably socialist. But, in every case, to succeed at the tasks I've mentioned, the people have the same basic needs. They need to make more of their own decisions; they need to act on their own brainstorms; they need to be able to learn from each other; they need to know the basic facts of their own economic and social life. They need to shake off an institutionalized secrecy that the rest of the world finds absurd and self-defeating. They need to know simple things, like the size of last year's wheat harvest, and big things, like what's going on in the world at large. They need to be able to leave, if they want. If they are denied all these, they cannot do very much at all.

To the Soviet leadership, I would say that these things are not our romantic ideals. Rather, they are the practical requirements of some of your own goals—and of our goals as well, for they are the key to transforming East-West relations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to the practical perspective with which I began: we don't plan policy in the expectation of transforming East-West relations. We seek incremental improvements, and we don't dismiss their value. The Soviet leadership should know that President Reagan is ready—patiently, methodically—to take small steps forward, and that we will respond in proportion to what we see from them.

But at this time of questioning in the Soviet Union, it seems to me that we should ask more of ourselves and of the Soviet side as well. We should recognize that those who seek only small improvements often end up with none. We know cosmetic improvements when we see them and know the meaning and the value of major change. We should ask those questions and insist on the answers that point the way. ■

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